

Educating Citizens: 3 critical aspects

When it comes to learning – be it in schools, universities, or adult education – much attention, quite rightly, is given to the development of basic skills (linguistic and mathematical); general knowledge; skills to get an income; health and environmental awareness; cultural appreciation (music, literature); and social competence (discipline, tolerance, volunteering).

But what about the inculcation of civic capability, which we all need in order to function as effective members of a self-governing society. Unquestioning subjects who submit to arbitrary rule may get by without it, but citizens cannot play their part in sustaining their own governance in the absence of such capability. There are three critical aspects of this capability that should be looked at more closely.

First, it is vital for us to develop our sense of ***Civic Identity***. We all have multiple identity markers associated with culture, gender, belief, economic status, ethnicity, language, locality, family, work, etc. But none of these should be accepted as a status-defining trait in a society of citizens where diverse members are all accorded equal respect. Furthermore, the foundational commitment to equal citizenship means that the readiness to stand by others and the expectation that others would stand by one, must not be pushed aside through the invocation of any other affiliation or attachment. Citizens should therefore learn not only that they have a political bond that binds them through the rights and responsibilities they share in upholding their collective self-governance, but also that any attempt to undermine this bond by privileging some 'higher' value should be guarded against.

Secondly, we need to have the ability to make ***Objective Judgement***. For citizens to advance their common wellbeing through public policies and practices, their participation in activities that guide how the state will act on their behalf needs to be carried out with an accurate understanding of the relevant facts, proposals, and arguments. This goes beyond basic reasoning skills, and covers competencies for dealing with rhetorical misdirection, seeing through prejudices and fallacies, as well as seeking out reliable sources of information, assessing evidence and the veracity of testimony, and weighing up rival interpretations.

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Citizens need to be trained from an early age so that they can differentiate unsubstantiated claims from reliable assertions. It is also important to be able to recognise when a belief or decision should be revised in the light of new findings, especially through critical exploration with others.

Thirdly, it is essential to comprehend the importance of **Accountable Governance** and what it entails in practice. No society can operate without a large number of collectively binding decisions being made by people who hold public offices through elections, delegation, or appointment. If the people in these positions are to act consistently in the interest of the public they serve, then members of the public must be able to ensure that they can be held to account for their actions. This involves grasping how state actions work, how people may attain positions with state power, and who has what responsibility for the impact on society. Ignorance of accountable governance can lead to dangerous apathy at one extreme, and susceptibility to manipulation by demagogues at the other. Citizens need to learn when they should trust or challenge those in public office, what accountability arrangements are necessary, and how they should act to secure due accountability.

All three aspects of civic capability outlined above barely feature in contemporary education. The neoliberal-minded may think that it does not matter too much so long as people acquire the skills to get a job. Some cynics may even welcome the fact that many citizens can be easily divided, deceived, and deprived of political efficacy. But if citizens are the ones to govern themselves without manipulation or domination by a ruling clique, then education has to step up and help people develop their civic capability.

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